

threading

Chat-based games tend to have awkward lags. Typing takes longer than speaking and there are no visual clues to know when a player is thinking or distracted or in the process of saying something. On more than one occasion, someone would type something that is missed or overlooked by the others, resulting in a standoff of inaction. These delays not only stretch the difference between real- and game-time, but also they can be quite frustrating and even boring.

The session described this month contains a dramatic case of threading. Daphne and Bertwald are each interacting with a different NPC. Rather than run these separately, I weave them together. This allows me to deal with one PC during the lag of the other. As a GM, it increases the pace to a robust level and keeps my interest longer. Hopefully, the players do not experience any increased lag and feel their characters are getting the proper attention without being in “audience mode.”

The disadvantage of threading is that when you print out the game log, the interwoven events can be difficult to follow. But the effect is somewhat interesting to read, so I left the threading intact without trying to unravel it.

comments

#321

dave castle

I have seen in many, if not most, players “applying their intelligence without the filter of acting a role” in sessions that focus on combat and tactics. At this past DunDraCon, I watched a couple of games my friends were in. While the CoC game was full of excited energy,¹ the D&D game seemed to have the life sucked out of it. The roleplaying seemed better in the CoC game, and I think it has much to do with giving the players and their characters things to do and discuss other than where to position their figures or which spell to cast. I do not fault D&D, but the approach to roleplaying that (it seems) most D&D players take and the scenarios they create.

Daphne and Bertwald has very little editing—mostly removing extraneous chit-chat, fixing (or mangling) spelling, punctuation,² and grammar. I

¹ Granted, it had a great GM, Zach Greenvoss

² In particular, the use of periods at the end of sentences.

sometimes have to re-arrange lines so they read in proper chronological order. When I tried to condense, I did not like the results.

michael cule

Think of the job as an acting gig and the dress code nothing more than wardrobe. Furthermore, it is a local “reality-theatre” company that is so cheap you have to provide your own wardrobe. :)

Hubris can help a GM survive bad sessions, but it does not necessarily help make good sessions. As I am allergic to hubris, I often react very, very poorly to these types of people.

lee gold

Another intent for a base is as office and operational headquarters that is neither home nor fortress.

viktor haag³

The online campaign uses character creation derived from Castle Falkenstein. Otherwise, I just wing it. So any “straining at the setting” you may detect is due entirely to my poor GMing abilities.

richard iorio ii

I was surprised that *Little Fears* failed to inspire me. Maybe if I went back to it at a different time, I might get ideas for campaigns or characters.

spike y jones

I liked the business descriptions, especially Turner’s Brickyard. Too bad some of the businesses with more adventure opportunities could not have longer descriptions.

brian misiaszek

The whole commoner class/level issue is one reason why I find D&D (of any edition) inelegant. You never hear these discussions with skill-based systems. Some may argue how many (skill) points a peasant has, however.

Even Sir Olivier knew the difference between being in character and out-of-character. Immersion is about being in-character, not how one gets there.

Unlike acting for the stage or screen, roleplaying involves constant improvisation. You cannot simply act your lines and follow your marks, but you have to make up with the lines and blocking as you go. To do

³ With new correct spelling!

this effectively, you either have to maintain two states of mind simultaneously (screenwriter and actor) or immersed into your character. A bit of both helps. Mixing in the mindset of audience helps too. Unfortunately, every game that I have seen that tries to turn players into screenwriters completely blows it and forgets (or does not care) that they have to be actors too.

pj perry

Welcome! Basing the number of skill levels on stats and having a stat mod for each seems like “double-dipping” to me. I would just give everyone the same number of skill levels without regard stats. Those with lower stats will have lower effective skill levels. Interestingly, BRP⁴ bases the number of skill levels on Intelligence and Education but uses no stat modifiers (except that Dodge starts at DEX x 2).

marion k sipe

Welcome! I liked the world-building questions, though I usually get stuck on the simple steps, like drawing map. : (

daphne and bertwald

summing up

Bertwald, played by Avis Crane, is a knight in training, son of a jester, and is seemingly being tested by the Duke.

Daphne, played by Matt Helms, is the assistant game warden to her father and would rather be on her own than around the court.

They were sent to find some children missing from a village. The villagers who went out to find the children never returned. Following their trail, our heroes discovered signs of a battle and learned the unfortunate fate of the would-be rescue party.

Forging onward, they came across an ogre’s cave. Waiting for the ogre to leave, they then rescued two of the missing children. Later, they rescued the third child from the psychological clutches of a witch (also the ogre’s “mommy”).

⁴ Basic Roleplaying, the system that runs Chaosium games like Call of Cthulhu, Stormbringer, and many others that are out of print.

returning home

The next day, the three kids are returned to their families safe, if a little worn for wear. A celebration is to be had in Daphne's and Bert's honor.

Rolf and his mother have a very touching moment. Daphne kisses Rolf on the cheek in front of everyone and Bert tells everyone how brave he was.

Marcus Smith shakes Bert's hand, “Were you able to find any of the others?”

Daphne produces the personal item they took off the body they found. “We found this, along with the person it used you belong to. Other than that, I'm afraid not.”

He takes it, examines it, then nods solemnly.

Bert is keeping quiet, thinking it might help if he makes it clear she's the boss.

He shakes her hand, “Please be our guests through tomorrow for the last rites.”

“Of course.”

Bert describes where they left the body.

“We shall send men out to retrieve the body....

Assuming it's safe, of course. ...?”

Bert looks at Daphne.

She says, “I don't believe you will find any trouble if you don't go looking for it.”

“It, being trouble. Very well. It will be done.”

“We can, of course, assist if you think there is still a possibility of finding the other three,” Daphne says.

“From your description of the cave and the cauldron, I had assumed they were lost,” Smith says. “We shall cremate their effigies tomorrow at dawn.”

She nods.

“If you excuse me, I must start preparations for the tonight's celebration.” Once Smith is playing leader, he is seen hugging Irwin like he'll never let go.

Bert was expecting a lot more happiness at bringing back the boys, but now he realizes that there are other sadnesses.

Bert notices that they've attracted quite a crowd around them. They recognize some of the people from the pub, like Ean, but most are strangers. Daphne is feeling a little uncomfortable with the attention.

Bert looks at Daphne. “I could sure use something to eat, and some rest, Mistress.”

The tavern keeper's wife comes up, “Would you like to come back to our home for a bath and change of clothes?”

Daphne answers, “That would be very nice, thank you.”

“I am sure we can find something that will fit well.” She motions to a couple of woman, who seem to be sizing both Bert and Daphne up before they scurry off.

Bert rubs his stomach, which is growling audibly.

She leads them back to the pub. “Help yourself to the bar and kitchen,” she tells Bert.

“Don't eat too much—you don't want to be full for the feast!”

She leads Daphne in back to their private quarters.

The barkeep is there, watching the place. Ean fetches hot water for Daphne.

Once they are alone, Daphne will say to her “Can I, ummm, ask you something?”

“Of course, milady.” She says with a broad smile.

Bert says, “Could I have ale, please?”

“Oh, it’s just Daphne, really. It’s just that.”

He hands Bert a stout ale. “So,” he motions his head to the back of the place, “you and she...?”

“You see, I haven’t really....” Daphne says. “I mean.... Oh never mind. Just, ummm, thanks for the bath.”

Bert blushes. “Uh... no, she’s my boss.”

She seems disappointed. “No, please.”

“I’m really hungry.” Bert asks, “Is there something I can eat?”

“I see,” he says, disappointed. “Help yourself,” he opens the door to the kitchen for Bert.

Daphne asks the wife, “Why did you marry your husband? I mean, how did you know?”

Bert struggles with himself. “I’d like to... but she didn’t... ummm... never mind.” He takes a long swig of his ale.

“Because he cooks better than I do.” She smiles, “Don’t laugh.”

“She seems the wily type,” the barkeep says. “My commiserations.”

“I had to hound him for three months before he proposed marriage.”

“I had to hound her for three months before my wife agreed to marry me.”

Bert says, “I can’t tell if she likes me or not. She almost let me kiss her, but since then she’s been really cold.”

“Why don’t you ask her? I don’t mean to be presumptuous, but you do not seem the type to be shy around women.”

“I’ve just, never really had to worry about things like this before. I feel so stupid.”

“I’m not usually,” Bert says. “She’s different, somehow. I think she’s sorry she let me get as close as I did.”

“Feeling stupid is part of it, dear. But feeling good is a large part of it.”

“I’m sure she has her reasons.” The barkeep adds, “Ever give her a gift?”

“I haven’t felt good, just confused,” Daphne admits.

Bert looks up. “A gift? Huh, I didn’t think about that. A gift...” He starts thinking about that.

“It will, praise Aurora, it will,” she says. “Just let it happen. Don’t rush, don’t hold back, just let your heart guide you. And ignore the butterflies.” She tickles and pokes Daphne in the midsection.⁵

“Worked for me, son, but then you can’t cook a blueberry pie like I can.”

“Blueberry pie?” Bert suddenly forgets all about Daphne, his stomach’s rumbling very loud now.

One hot bath later and one blueberry pie later.

She hands Daphne a very nice, if a tad plain, one-piece dress. “I’ll have your other things washed and ready for you tomorrow morn’.”

“Thank you.”

Bert is still in the kitchen when Daphne comes out. Bert, thinking about that gift stuff, has saved Daphne a piece of pie.

“So... “ Daphne pauses. “We’re heading back tomorrow, right?”

Bert smiles at Daphne. “Whatever you wish, Mistress. Here, I saved this pie for you.”

“Oh, that’s OK. I ate too many blueberries once and got sick. Can hardly eat them now.”

Bert’s face falls. “Oh. That’s too bad.”

“When’s this big feast supposed to start, anyways?”

“I don’t know. Ask the barkeep. Well, I’d better go get cleaned up.” Bert gets up, to head off to the stables, looking for Ean.

It is an hour or so before sunset. Ean gets fresh water for Bert’s bath

Daphne sits at the bar, fidgeting with the dress.

“It looks nice on you, milady.”

“Oh, umm, thank you. I don’t normally wear dresses, though.”

“Not exactly good for hunting, are they?”

Ean takes away Bert’s clothes. The bath water is warm and relaxing. Bert hadn’t realized how grimy he’d gotten

“That’s for sure.” Daphne says, “Well, I doubt you hunting all the time.”

Bert scrubs himself, thinking about Daphne.⁶ Finally he decides to stop worrying about everything. Hey, if she wants me, she’ll have to come to me, he thinks.

Ean comes back with new clothes. “Did you really slay an ogre?” He asks Bert wide-eyed.

Bert steps out of the tub, drying himself, and puts on the clean clothes. “Who’s saying that?”

“Everyone! Nigel said they were held in cave and you rescued them.”

“Well, yeah, we did that.”

“And there was an ogre and you killed it, right?”

“Umm, not exactly. We waited until the ogre left, and then we rescued them.”

The barkeep leaves Daphne for a few minutes to work in the kitchen. The place is empty except for an old dog, which walks over to Daphne and puts his head in her lap.

“We did have a battle with a witch, though.”

“And that’s when you killed the ogre?”

“No, we didn’t kill the ogre. He was really really big and strong.” Bert is feeling kind of defensive about this.⁷

“So are you!”

⁵ Avis: ooohhh! girls in the bathtub together! Poor Bert can't watch... :)

⁶ Avis’ words, I swear.

⁷ GM payback for the “let’s wait for him to go away” tactic they used.

Bert stands a little taller. “But if we'd gotten killed, we couldn't have rescued the others. I... umm... we decided that was more important.”

Ean struggles with the concept, trying to figure out when and where the ogre got killed.

“Look! We didn't kill the ogre! We made a deal with his mother!”

A call for his name distracts him and he leaves.⁸

Eventually, the entire village has gathered in the courtyard. Tables and chairs have been brought out. A good fire, almost a bonfire, is raging in the center. This is hardly a courtly affair, but they mean well. The musicians—both of them—are not half-bad. The food is good, though prepared in a bit of a rush.

Bert is scrubbed and clean, hair still a bit wet. Bertie's tempted to join in with them. But then he realizes he's still hungry.

The entire village raises their cups in several toasts to our heroes. The wine and ale is flowing.

Bert tosses back an ale or two.

Daphne sits quietly at her table, watching the villagers.

Bert looks at Daphne.

They invite Bertie and Daphne to join in a country-dance. Bert looks shyly at Daphne, then goes to stand in his appropriate place. Though this is not a dance he knows, he is confident he can fake it well enough. On the other hand, Daphne is hesitant to join—dancing isn't her forte. But Daphne is being prodded by everyone at the table and Bertie waves her to join him.

Bertie goes over and whispers, “We don't want to offend them. Don't worry, I'll help you.”

Daphne hopes the light from the fire covers the fact that she is blushing when she eventually joins in.

Bert takes her hand (carefully!).

The dance is simple enough for Daphne to follow.⁹ She fumbles through the first few steps and makes a few wrong turns, but then so do some of the other dancers (whether from wine or inexperience, she is not quite sure).

Dancing is one of Bert's strengths, and he attempts to gently provide her a lead. By the end, both are breathless and a little dizzy. Everyone applauds to them, themselves, and the musicians.

Bertie looks into Daphne's eyes.

“What?”

He just smiles. Still holding her hand, he walks to the table with the wine and ale. “Which do you like?”

A new dance starts up without them.

“Neither, really.”

“What do you like to drink, then?”

She shrugs. “Just water, normally. As you've probably noticed, I'm not very fancy.”

“Would you like to dance again?”

“I'm still a little dizzy from last time. I'm thinking I'm going to have a bit more of that cheese.” She thinks to herself, “what a stupid thing to say!!”

“Let me get it for you.” Bert leaps to the table to get her some. He brings it back, offers it to her.

“Thank you.”

Eventually the night winds down and people start going to bed. Everyone wants to be up for the cremation at dawn, leaving only a few hours for sleep.

He stands next to her, and slowly, shyly, puts his arm around her shoulders. “I guess we'd better get some sleep. I'll walk you back to the inn.”

“Umm, thanks. Where are you staying tonight?”

“In the stables. Right?”

“Oh. Ummm.”

He starts walking toward the inn, holding her hand.

“I don't know what you are expecting, but I think that, uh...”

He lifts her hand up to his lips, and kisses it.

“Ummm.”

“What, Daphne?”

He turns to look at her face.

“Nothing.”

Bert stops walking, and pulls her around to face him.

“What?” he says very gently.

“I... uh...”¹⁰

He tips her chin up with a finger, and then leans down to gently kiss her.

She allows herself to be kissed for a moment and then breaks away from him.

He doesn't stop her, but fails to keep hold of her hand.

“I'll see you tomorrow morning.” She turns and runs for the inn.

He looks after her, shaking his head, then laughs, and heads for the stables.

She goes upstairs, but when she gets there, she finds two of the cots already occupied by the barkeep and his wife.

“Oh, sorry!” She sneaks back down to the main room and flop onto one of the stools.

This is where Bert finds her. “What are you doing here? Why aren't you in bed?”

“It's sort of occupied.”

“By who?”

“The barkeep and his wife.”

“They weren't there last night? How many beds are there in the room?”

Daphne now remembers them saying something about letting you have their bed tonight.¹¹ “I guess she did say that, uh, you could sleep in their bedroom.”

“Me? Why would they let me sleep there? They must have meant you.”

“I'm sure she probably meant we could share it.”

Bert looked at her. “Let me take you up there, then I'll go out to the stable.”

⁸ And then we had a ½-hour discontinuity, as Matt was booted offline.

⁹ Poor Courtly Graces, but Great Athletics.

¹⁰ “What?” the GM says not so gently. :)

¹¹ They are not anything if not meddlesome.

"It's nothing against you. It's just."

"I know. It's okay. When you're ready... if you're ready, you'll let me know." He stands up and holds out his hand to her.

She half smiles. "As long as you stay on your half of the bed, it would probably be OK."

Bert laughs. "I'm not sure I could do that. Come on, let me take you to the room, then I'll leave."

"That's OK, I think I can find it. Good night."

Bert nods, gives her a quick peck on the cheek, says "It's okay if we're just friends, you know."

She gives him a funny look. "Friends? I don't even like you," she says, smiling.

He smiles, leaves for the stable, and falls asleep eventually.

They are woken in the pre-dawn hours to go to the funeral. On the east side of town, they have erected a wooden structure with four bodies on top. They are just effigies, designed to be symbolic of the three dead that were not recovered. The gathered villagers are solemn but now sorrowful. With the first rays of the sun, the structure is lit and the souls are sent on their journey.

Afterwards, Daphne and Bertwald are given their clean, old clothes, but are told to keep the ones from last night as a gift. As they head out of town in the early morning, they are stopped by a woman they recognize as Rolf's mother. She hands them a small, simple wooden box.

"Thank you for saving my boy. He's had it really tough."

Bert says, "Maybe things will be better for him after this."

Inside the box is a pendant made of wood on a thin leather string.

Daphne says, "Thank you ma'am, but we were just doing our jobs. This really isn't necessary."

The pendant has the shape of an inverted, elongated teardrop. Bert looks at it curiously.

"No, please, you must take it," Rolf's mother insists. "It is for luck."

The wood is smooth and polished; the pendant is the length of a forefinger.

Bert takes it, and puts it around Daphne's neck.

Daphne sputters some sort of protest about it being too valuable, all in a day's work, et cetera, but she will hear none of that and saying thank you once more, returns to the village.

Bert says, "Shall we get on our way?"

"Lead the way, Skippy."

He gives her a look. "Skippy? Skippy??"

He mounts his horse, and starts down the road.

She giggles

"When I was about 8, my dad caught a squirrel and gave it me as a pet."

"Yeah, so?"

"I called him Skippy because he was always jumping around."

"You kind of remind me of him sometimes."

"I remind you of a squirrel. Thanks."

"There you go again getting all huffy," she says.

"Skippy used to do that, too."

He just shakes his head.

The two-day journey back is uneventful. It is late when they arrive to the foyer in front of the great hall.

Daphne's father greets her with a hug. Bertwald's father greets him with a shrug.

"I am so happy to have you back, daughter."

"You better had not embarrassed me, boy."

"And of your task, Daphne? Your dear Father is dying of curiosity."

Bert is very aware of the difference in greetings of the two fathers. He has a heavy feeling in his stomach.

"Nothing we couldn't handle, father."

The jester says, "The Duke will want a report in the morning."

Daphne tells her father, "Although you might want the men in northwestern forests take care for an ogre in the area."

"Ogre?" the game warden exclaims, "Merik, defend us."

"Oh, and a witch—the ogre's mother. I don't think they'll give us any problems, though."

Bert remembers that Hedric has insulted Daphne, so he hustles his father away.

"I am going to bed, boy. I leave you with the girl."

Bert blushes, hoping Daphne did not hear. Fortunately, she was ignoring the jester.

The huntsman gives Daphne a look as if he needs a really stiff drink. "A witch, you say?"

"I'm guessing," she answers.

He glances over to Bertwald, looking for some more details.

"Yeah, I'd say she was definitely a witch, though we managed to stop her before she cast any spells," Bert says.

Daphne adds, "We put the fear of the Duke in her, though, so I don't think she'll cause many problems."

"I need a drink."

The next morning, they have a semi-private audience in front of the Duke, along with the scribe, their fathers, and a couple others. "You are to be commended for your actions. I'm proud of both of you." The Duke smiles. Bert's father is noticeably annoyed.

Bert blushes, then looks uneasily at his father.

"Thank you, your, ummm, majesty," Daphne says.

Duke Leopold continues, "We shall send knights to verify the ogre and witch have left."

"We didn't exactly tell them they had to leave, ummm, sir."

Bert whispers in her ear, "My Lord".

"What?"

"My Lord!"

The jester seems to be thinking, "Great, now the boy will get ideas."

Bert just knew that Dad was pissed at him.

“Very well then, other business is at hand.”

“Are we excused, then, your, uhhh specialness?”

Leopold laughs, Daphne's father shakes his head, and the jester scoffs with derision.

Bert's teeth are gritted now. “MY LORD!” he whispers.

“Yes, Daphne, you are excused.”

She does an awkward curtsy and exits the chamber with her dad. Bert bows, and leaves as well. His bow is much more graceful than Daphne's curtsy.

Daphne's father has his arm around her shoulder.

Later that day, Bert goes about his daily business and a small crowd gathers around him.

Harmony, a pretty, if skinny, lady in waiting says, “Can you show us how you slew the ogre?”

“Harmony, my sweet, I'd love to show you, in private.” He smiles.

Harmony blushes and Bert feels a jab to the ribs from one of the other lads.

Daphne goes out to the archery range and practice shooting.

Bert fakes a jab back at the guy. “Actually, we didn't slay the ogre. We rescued some kids.”

Daphne was just going to work on mending some of the gear, but finds that all her usual chores and tasks have been done for her. Her father was probably trying to keep himself busy so he wouldn't worry.

Bert sees Daphne come onto the archery range, and notices a couple of the maidens following her with their eyes and exchanging whispers, snickering. “What are you two laughing about?”

“Huh? Oh nothing.”

Bert gives them a bored look, and turns his back. He makes a point of talking to the other girls.

Shooting helps clear her mind, and Daphne does well at the range until she feels a presence behind her.

Bert tells the story, with only a few embellishments, managing to refrain from too much boasting.

Bert is told of a tournament that was announced yesterday. It will be in a fortnight; the Queen and her entourage are expected.

Daphne looks casually over her shoulder. She sees a tall, thin man with dark eyes she does not recognize. “Can I help you?”

“Your skills are quite good,” he says in an odd accent

“You will be entering the tourney for sure, Bertwald?”

Harmony asks.

Daphne responds, “I bet you say that to all the girls.”

“Sure! Of course!” Bert says confidently, giving Harmony an extra nice smile.

“Rarely have I seen a woman with your sense for the target.” He adds, “Your stroke could be smoother, though. You have too much tension in your shoulders.”

“Will you take this?” Harmony hands Bert a kerchief.

Daphne says, “So can I ask you something?”

The stranger smiles a creepy, thin smirk, “Only if I may ask you something in return.”

Bert hesitates just a second, then takes it. “Thank you, my lady,” he says, dropping to a knee and smiling up at her.

“Who in Merik's name are you?”

Harmony bites her lip as she lets go of the kerchief.

“A messenger from the South.”

Bert sees Harmony's lip biting, and stands up. “Are you sure, my lady, that there isn't someone else you'd rather have carry your token?”

“Oh, well, of course.”

“Now, I shall ask my question.”

Harmony shakes her head slowly, staring intensely into his eyes

Daphne looks like she is waiting

“As I return to the South on the morrow, would you dine with me tonight?”

Bert stares back, his blood starting to pound a bit harder in his temples. He offers Harmony his arm. “Shall we walk in the gardens for awhile?”

Daphne nods in the general direction of the court girls. “I think they are a little more your type.”

“I thought you'd never ask,” Harmony says as she takes his arm.

Bert starts to stroll off with her toward the formal gardens. As they walk away, she glances back to the others, but Bert does not catch the non-verbal exchange

The man in black lets out a snide little chuckle, “Hardly, my dear. I seek intelligence in my company, not vapid twittering.”

Bertwald tucks the kerchief inside his shirt and then puts his hand over Harmony's on his arm.

“Even still, I don't think I am the companion you are looking for,” Daphne says.

Harmony bubbles, “Margarette said that Sir Willam¹² would win the joust. I said that you would surely embarrass him.”

“I can but try, my lady.” He lifts her hand to his lips, and kisses her fingers.

“Very well, milady.” He bows, ruffling his black cape.

Daphne smiles and turns back to her archery. The stranger walks on toward the stables. The first arrow Daphne lets loose barely hits the target.

Harmony blushes and tries desperately not to giggle.

Bert steps into a little alcove, surrounded by high bushes. He turns to face Harmony, and leans close to kiss her.

Harmony's lips are soft and sweet. She just melts with Bert's kiss.

Daphne frowns, takes a deep breath, and shoots the last arrow in her quiver. The last arrow buries itself halfway down the shaft into the bull's-eye.

Bert reaches up to touch her cheek, then trails his fingers down her neck, slowly, and continues down.

“HARMONY!”

¹² No relationship to the stable boy.

Daphne collects her arrows and heads back to the rooms she shares with her dad, feeling a nice long soak sounds in order.

Bert sees an elderly matron stomping towards her, “You are late for your lessons.”

Bert leaps away from her. He bows hastily to the matron, and then to Harmony, and leaves quickly.

The matron grabs her arm and drags her way; Bert overhears, “you are not to be associating with the likes of him.”

Bert stops dead in his tracks, and glares back at the old biddy, but he's blushing, too. He heads to the stables, and spends a couple hours currying his horse.

While in the stables, Bert sees a tall man wearing black leather and a black cape. He is tending to saddlebags, apparently preparing to leave.

Bert nods politely at the man. The man nods to Bert, without expression.

“He's a good for nothing,” Daphne hears a voice behind her. “And I should know.” It is Bert's father, of course, coming out of the shadows. He seems to have been waiting for her near her father's residence.

Again, she casually glances over her shoulder. “Excuse me?”

“Bertwald, my son.” The words drip like bile from his lips.

“What of him?”

The man in the stables leaves; Bert is now alone. Bert works out most of his anger—his horse has not been so well brushed in a long time.

“Nothing but trouble.”

“I can't imagine how that would have happened.”

“Just consider yourself warned, ... Miss.”

She stares at him. “You may leave now.”

He passes Daphne on his way out the hall. She can easily smell alcohol.

She waits until he is safely out of sight until she goes in.

a new adventure

Things quickly fall back to routine over the next several days.

Daphne finds there is lots of work to do in preparation for the tourney. Daphne is not too happy about extra work so a bunch of macho bastards can go around showboating. Plus, there will be a hunt the day before in honor of the Queen.

Bert wraps up the kerchief in a big piece of paper and pays one of the pages to deliver the package to Harmony. He includes a note. “My lady, I am returning this. I don't think you should do something your family so obviously disapproves of. With thanks, Bertwald.”

Three days before the tourney, Daphne is walking in the hallway when she is stopped by the Duke.¹³

She almost walks right past him before she realizes who it is. “I'm sorry, my, errrrr, Duke. What is it you require?”

“Daphne. I hear you are less than pleased with the preparations for the tournament.”

“Oh no, uh, sire. It's just that.... umm never mind.”

“No you are not happy or No I am mistaken?”

She shrugs. “It all just seems a but silly, Duke.”

“How so?”

“Oh, you know—guys riding around knocking each other off of horses.” Daphne continues, “It just seems they could be doing something more constructive with their time.”

“What would you have them do?”

“But that is just my opinion, sir.”

She shrugs. “Building cottages for widows and orphans?”

“Your father is a trusted friend and I welcome his opinions and I would like to welcome yours, if you would only speak more openly.”

“As you have probably noticed, sir, I am not one much given to affairs of the court.”

“Good. Every ruler needs an advisor who is not so much given to the affairs of the court.”

“I prefer to keep my opinions to myself unless it is a matter I know something about,” Daphne says. “Otherwise you might just say something stupid.”

“I have a task to ask of you, Daphne.”

“Anything, my errrr...”

“Lord.”

“My Lord.”

It would mean you will miss the tourney, I am afraid,” the Duke smirks.

“Well, if my Duke requires my absence, then I have no choice but to obey.”

“Good. Come to my chambers at midnight.”

She does a floppy kind of curtsy again.

The Duke goes on his way, humming.

Daphne passes the Jester, who was following the Duke at a distance, in the hallway. Daphne wonders why in the hell would they have to meet at midnight. She hopes he does not try to talk to her again and gives a low-grade glare in the jester's direction.

Bert is resting in the yard after an afternoon of practice when he hears a “Shhh, don't say anything.”

Bert feels something light and silky brush against his neck, “Keep this.”

Bert reaches up casually, and touches whatever it is touching him. Does he recognize the voice?

Bert finds Harmony's kerchief, “I must go now.”

He grabs for her hand. “Wait.”

Harmony pauses, pulled back by Bert.

“Why are you doing this?”

Harmony gives Bertwald a devilish grin, “I do what I please.”

He gives her hand a quick kiss, and lets her leave, tucking the kerchief in his pocket.

¹³ Yes, he's a very hands-on, personable kind of guy—one of the reason everyone likes him.

"But now, I must be off before I am caught," she says, ignoring the contradiction. She sighs heavily at the kiss then rushes off.

He grins. "Damn," Bert thinks, "I should have asked her to meet me somewhere."

Bertwald sees the same matron stomping up to him; she is looking around for someone.

He makes sure the kerchief is securely tucked away.

"Where is she?"

Bert bows, like a servant, but a bit ironically. "Where is who, my Lady?"

"You know who." She stares him down. "But no matter."

He bows again.

"I am to deliver this to you," she hands him a sealed envelope.

He takes it, looks at it.

"No doubt some disciplinary action." It has the Duke's seal on it.

"But it is none of my business." She leaves abruptly.

He opens the envelope.

The message is simple. "Midnight. My chambers. Burn This." with the Duke's signature.

He walks slowly back to the stables, re-reading the note and wondering what it means. He then burns the note.

At midnight, Bertwald and Daphne run into each other, literally, just outside the Duke's chambers.

"What are you doing here?"

"What are you doing here?"

"Not what you think!" Daphne affirms.

"What was I thinking?"

"I mean, showing up at the Duke's chamber in the middle of the night. He asked me to come here—not for, you know..."

"Well, since he invited me here, I'm not likely to think that." He grins. "Unless the Duke has... unusual tastes."

Daphne cringes a little bit. "So you don't know anything, either?"

"No, just that I got a mysterious message saying to be here at midnight."

"I guess we should find out, then, huh?" She knocks on the door

"Come"

Daphne goes in—ahead of Bert.

The Duke is sitting behind his desk, writing by candlelight. "Shut the door."

Daphne gestures at Bert to shut the door. Bert closes it.

"Have a seat." He motions in front of the desk, not stopping his writing.

They sit.

Daphne speaks first, "You summoned us, my lord?"

He holds up a "give me a minute" finger.

Bert looks at Daphne.

Daphne looks around the room without being too obvious. She has never been in his private chambers before.

"You.... are to take this..." he finishes writing, "... to a friend..."

Daphne notices a figure in the shadows at the far end of the room. "And that will take two of us sir? Or three?"

The Duke rolls up the page and places it in a tube, "... in Olden."

Bert looks startled, looks over at her.

"I told you she was skilled, milord."¹⁴ They both recognize the man.

Daphne adds, "If only I could relax my shoulders."

Bert turns around to look at the source of the voice.

The Duke has an awkward expression as if he's thinking, "That is what she meant about saying the wrong thing."

The man from the stables is standing in front of the two, at the far end of the room, and walking toward them.

"Well, you are to leave immediately and not tell anyone of your mission and not wear any of my colors," Leopold says.

"But do not act like you are hiding," mister creepy adds.

"And what of him, sire?" Daphne asks.

"I am of no consequence." Even the Duke seems put-off by him.

She nods to Bert. "I've already got one of those tagging along." The Duke seems quite put-off my this last comment. Bert blushes at Daphne's comment, but tries to act like he didn't hear it.

Bert stands. "I'll be ready to leave whenever you are, Daphne."

Daphne turns back to the Duke. "And who are we to deliver this to, my lord?"

He seals the scroll case. "Show this to no one until you have met your contact."

"One of my men," the man in black says, "He goes by the name of Germain."

Daphne addresses the Duke, "And who are we to deliver this to, my lord?"

He responds, "This man will contact you when you arrive in Olden."

"Very well, sir."

Bert asks, "Will we be waiting for an answer or returning immediately?"

"He will give you instructions, as necessary," the dark man interjects.

Daphne picks up the scroll case and says to Bert, "I'd suggest you hiding this in your pants, but I'm afraid whatsername might find it."

The Duke stands up, "Again, I apologize for you missing the tournament. I would have liked to see you ride," he says to Bert.

"Thank you," Bert says, stammering slightly. Then he says to Daphne, "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Godspeed."

"Thank you, sire."

Bert bows to the Duke, nods to the stranger, and heads out of the room. Daphne is right behind him.

¹⁴ The voice is like Hannibal Lector on a bad day.